

# Evil in Our Midst

## An Op-ed Column

By Senator Mark Ridley-Thomas, Chairman of the Legislative Black Caucus  
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On April 4, 1967, exactly one year before his assassination in 1968, Dr. Martin Luther King Jr., this nation's greatest contemporary disciple of non-violence, openly declared his opposition to the Vietnam War.

He told an audience at Riverside Church that ending the war through non-violent means was a "moral imperative;" that his "conscience (left him) no other choice" than to condemn the war.

Despite strong opposition from the Civil Rights and political establishments to his anti-war stance, Dr. King decried the war that was changing the nation's domestic priorities and siphoning off resources needed to address economic and educational inequities, and health disparities.

His critics urged him to stick to the domestic issue of black civil rights and stay out of international affairs. But Dr. King's moral plea did not have borders.

Once again the U.S. is involved in an unpopular and costly war based on questionable motives, ambiguous objectives and evil practices: a war, which seems to have no crest to its rising iniquity.

Total funding for the Iraq War hovers near half-a-trillion dollars, while domestic spending for health, education, the infrastructure, foster care, the elderly and the disabled, sustains continuous cuts.

The State of California, often thought to be the wealthiest in the nation, has not been spared as we consider the governor's draconian proposed budget cuts.

As we recently commemorated the non-violent life and legacy of Dr. King, we cannot ignore the immorality of war that, he said, ravages our economy and "mutilates our conscience."

Nowhere is that "mutilated conscience" more evident than in the alarming issue of health professionals involved in torture in the Iraq War.

In 2002, for the first time in American history, the United States Department of Justice reinterpreted national and international law related to the treatment of prisoners of war in a manner that purported to justify long-prohibited interrogation methods and treatment of

detainees; and initiated a radical new policy allowing the torture of prisoners of war and other captives.

Reports from the International Red Cross, The New England Journal of Medicine, the British Medical Journal, military records, and first-person accounts, provide overwhelming evidence that military physicians and psychologists have directly participated in the development and cover-up of torture and abuse of detainees in U.S. custody.

Medical professionals are reported to have advised interrogators as to whether particular prisoners were fit enough to survive physical maltreatment, informed interrogators about prisoners' phobias and other psychological vulnerabilities that could be exploited during questioning, failed to report incidents of alleged torture, force-fed prisoners who were on hunger strikes, and altered the death certificates of prisoners who died.

Additionally, the Bush Administration has admitted to waterboarding prisoners - a crime under domestic law, including the Torture Statute and the War Crimes Act, and prohibited by the U.S. Army Field Manual.

Yet, Malcolm Nance, Director, Special Readiness Services International SRSI, has stated that waterboarding is done "under the watch of a doctor."

And last month (March 8) President Bush blocked an effort by congressional Democrats to limit interrogation measures by vetoing an intelligence authorization bill that would have outlawed waterboarding and other harsh methods.

One leadership position at Guantanamo Bay, where this was reportedly taking place, was licensed to practice medicine in California.

As professional licensure and codes of ethics are regulated by states, California has the obligation to notify members of laws concerning torture that may result in their prosecution.

This week, I will put to a vote Senate Joint Resolution 19 on the floor of the Senate that states that the U.S. Department of Defense has "failed to oversee the ethical conduct of California-licensed health professionals related to torture."

As chairman of the Senate Committee on Business, Professionals and Economic Development, which has oversight over medical and health professional licenses, I held a hearing and accepted testimony on this issue on January 14 at the State Capitol.

Representatives from the American Medical Association, the American Psychiatric Association, the American Nurses Association, the American Friends Service Committee and Physicians for Social Responsibility backed my Resolution.

The World Medical Association, issued guidelines discouraging physicians from using their medical knowledge, skills or health information to facilitate or otherwise aid any coercive interrogation and torture, legal or illegal.

Closer to home, the California Medical Association also states that it “condemns any participation in, cooperation with or failure to report by physicians and other health professionals the mental or physical abuse, sexual degradation or torture of prisoners or detainees.

Torture is much more than a political issue. It is an ethical, moral and spiritual issue that has not only become a shame, but it is an evil in our midst.

Dr. King would not remain silent on an issue of such moral importance. Nor will I. Dr. King repeatedly warned us that, “He who passively accepts evil is as much involved in it as he who helps to perpetrate it.”

Right-minded Americans understand that to protect foreign prisoners of war from torture, also protects the rights of our citizens, indeed, our children, from being tortured if they become prisoners of war.

In this period of international crisis, we must be ever reminded of what Dr. King stated so emphatically, “An injustice anywhere is a threat to justice everywhere.”

*Mark Ridley-Thomas is a California State Senator representing the 26th Senatorial District. He has authored SJR 19, which is scheduled for a vote on the Senate floor this week.*  
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